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ABSTRACT

Adherence to a variety of conceptual frameworks in psychological treatment has resulted in technical and theoretical eclecticism. Therapy techniques have become reduced to a set of tactics in which the therapist juggles conceptual frameworks in an attempt to maximize constructive behavior change. The practitioner must conceptualize his therapeutic philosophy and client approach because such conceptualization affects how the problem is formulated, what the therapist's role and responsibilities are, and the specifications of therapeutic tactics. Most importantly, a consistent conceptual framework assures that the therapist will not behave in mutually incompatible ways from one session to the next, ultimately risking limited success rates. Finally, theoretical eclecticism limits the therapist's intellectual growth by discouraging critical analysis of the theoretical tenets of one philosophy. Given that a thorough understanding and commitment to one consistent conceptual viewpiont is beneficial, a behavioral-analytic conceptual viewpoint offers still further advantages over other equally acceptable frameworks. A behavioral framework can be used in understanding and dealing with all people and any kind of behavior. Behavioral intervention has good potential for corrective feedback since it focuses on empirical events and pushes the therapist to consider alternative strategies and tactics when therapy fails. (BL)

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BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTION:
CONCEPTUAL VIEWPOINT VS. SET OF TACTICS

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Behavioral Intervention:

Conceptual Viewpoint vs. Set of Tactics[1]

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During the past 25 years, changes in behavior have become more or less universally accepted as the criteria for successful treatment. Behavior is widely recognized as the bottom line on the real world's balance sheet. Most psychologists use a variety of techniques derived from a variety of theoretical frameworks. Such an emperical approach, which I'll call technical eclecticism, in no way necessitates acceptance of the theoretical framework from which a given technique originated.

During the same quarter century, academic psychologists have failed to come to anything like a theoretical concensus. Therefore, students are taught to conceptualize their subject matter first from one framework and then from another. I will call this theoretical eclecticism.

Therapy techniques may be viewed as a set of tactics for maximizing constructive behavior change. Does it matter how the practitioner conceptualizes what he or she is doing? I

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believe it does. Is it desirable, or even possible, to be theoretically eclectic? Only if common sense is to be preferred over systematic philosophical and scientific analysis. Is there an advantage to a behavior analytic framework over other theoretical frameworks? I believe there is.

Does It Matter?

I propose that the way practitioners conceptualize what they are doing matters for several reasons. Three conceptual frameworks will be compared to demonstrate how it matters: psychoanalytic, client-centered and behavior analytic. Although there are other conceptual frameworks that guide some therapists, they are less clearly delineated at present and are represented less consistently in textbooks that describe therapy systems. The purpose of this section is to point out how one's conceptual framework makes a difference in one's work as a practitioner.

First, the formulation of the problem will differ among therapists working within different conceptual frameworks. Consider the case of a young man, who has a good job that pays very well but who is dependent on his mother for emotional support as well as help in the chores of daily living. The psychoanalyst might well see the problem as an unresolved Oedipus complex. The client-centered therapist might see the problem as the failure of the man to take responsibility for his psychological growth. The behavior analyst might see the problem as a lack of reinforcement contingencies alternative to those in which the man's mother plays a significant role.

Perhaps it is immediately apparent that those 3 ways of

formulating the problem lead to different views of therapist-as-change-agent and different views about the kinds of changes that might be wrought. The psychoanalytic and the behavioral formulations both suggest the therapist must do something that will result in change. The nature of the change is pre-ordained in the psychoanalytic scheme: resolution of the Oedipus complex will be followed by normal psychological growth. From the behavior analytic viewpoint, any number of alternative contingency systems might replace or come to augment those contingencies which presently define the man's environment. In the client-centered formulation, the therapist is hardly an agent at all. The therapist provides the opportunity for the client to change, not by doing or saying anything specific, but mainly by being a non-discriminating audience. She views herself, perhaps, as the soil from which the flower springs, fulfilling its potential in keeping with its intrinsic nature.

Thus the client-centered therapist, if she has a properly therapeutic personality (one might say comprised of the right mix of nutrients) does not need to concern herself with how her words and deeds might steer the client's behavior or with the relative advantages or disadvantages of different directions of change for the client. On the other hand, the behavior therapist has created for herself a whole host of problems by considering the possibility that the client may change in a variety of ways, some of which he may not be able to conceive of at present but nevertheless would be pleased with if they occurred. The psychoanalytic therapist has to choose carefully when to introduce or pursue certain topics but can

legitimately take for granted that if he chooses wisely, normal development will follow and he doesn't need to concern himself with alternative possibilities.

Given the different ways they have formulated the problem and the roles of therapist and client, it follows that there will be a difference in how the client's failure to improve will affect the 3 therapists. The client-centered therapist is justified, within his theoretical framework, in laying full responsibility for improvement on the client, assuming the therapist has a properly therapeutic personality. In other words, if her personality has allowed 9 clients to become self-actualizing and the 10th one quits therapy or does not improve, she has every reason to believe she provided the proper soil and he did not make use of it.

The psychoanalytic therapist, on the other hand, will have to wonder if he interpreted the client's resistance too soon and thus strengthened it; or whether he did indeed make transference problems more difficult because of his own counter transference. And the behavior analytic therapist must consider the possibility that therapeutic failure was the result of her failure to present the relevant alternative to the client, her failure to provide the critical COR, her failure to focus on behavior relevant to the environment in which the client was likely to live in, etc.

In summary, it seems to matter how the therapist conceptualizes therapy because it affects how the problem is formulated, what the therapist's role and responsibilities are, and the other as well as the specification of therapeutic tactics.

Eclecticism as a Way of Life

Many practitioners claim to adhere to no one conceptual framework, proclaiming themselves "eclectics". Such theoretical eclecticism is to be differentiated from a willingness to make use of therapy techniques derived from alternative frameworks. For example, as a practicing behavior analyst I may use "interpretation" (a technique derived from psychoanalytic framework) or "accept the feelings" of my clients (a technique derived from client-centered therapy). However I will view myself in the first case as extending stimulus control of verbal behavior so that newly labelled behavioral events may come to affect the client's behavior. And in the second case, I view myself as allowing responses suppressed by punishment to be emitted and extinguished. Therapists of alternative conceptual frameworks will explain their use of behavioral techniques from their viewpoint. One may thus take advantage of any technique empirically demonstrated as useful and remain entirely consistent conceptually.

But is adherence to a theoretical framework to be preferred over theoretical eclecticism? Below are some of the reasons that question should elicit a resounding "Yes: Any framework is better than no framework".

Perhaps the most important reason for having a consistent conceptual framework is that the therapist is not as likely to behave in mutually incompatible ways from one session to the next. Since each framework is derived from certain basic assumptions which may be quite opposite one another, the possibility for consistency is inversely proportional to the number of ways the therapist conceptualizes the nature of therapy.

Such inconsistent behavior on the part of the therapist would appear to be grossly detrimental to anybody, and particularly to someone seeking help. In fact, a large number of problems have been identified as due to inconsistent treatment of clients by significant others in their environment. (Bateson 1956)

In addition to the confusion caused the client by inconsistency on the part of the therapist, eclecticism offers no clear cut direction for the therapist either. If the theoretical eclectic conceptualizes his client's problems from a behavioral view at one point, and a client-centered view a day or so later, how is he to respond when a technique does not have the effect it was advertised to have? If it was a behavioral technique that "didn't work", does the therapist reject a behavioral explanation and assume the client did not seize the opportunity,for example, for reinforcement to work? Does this mean the consequence provided by the therapist would have been a reinforcer if the client had done his part?

Or does the therapist adopt the assumptions underlying behavior analytic framework when he uses a behavior technique and those underlying an alternative framework when using alternative techniques? How does he, then, determine which technique to use when? Does he view the client from one framework for 3 sessions, then change to another for 3 sessions? Or does he examine the client's overt behavior from a behavioral framework and assume the client's covert behavior is better dealt with as intrapsychic processes? If so, his only clue to the problematic covert behavior is, of course, overt behavior, albeit poorly defined and understood.

Theoretical eclecticism appears to be, at best, a retreat to "common sense", which is sometimes not common and often non sense. Common sense appears to be a hodge-podge of accumulated "knowledge" which has been derived empirically in some cases and in others from earlier philosophical viewpoints which may be incompatible with each other. The primary problem with common sense is that the assumptions underlying it are usually unexamined and thus one doesn't actually know where one is coming from and certainly can't know where one is going. Because of their empirical derivation, some common sense notions are useful and we all undoubtedly fall back on common sense when all else fails. Even so, reliance on common sense is a temporary solution. Technical as well as scientific progress in every field has historically advanced very rapidly after common sense was replaced by a clear and consistent theoretical framework, and usually after a number of incompatible frameworks competed for dominance (Kuhn 1962).

Perhaps the worst result of theoretical eclecticism is that conceptual growth is likely to be stunted. Since the theoretical eclectic switches assumptions from one moment to the next, his assumptions can never be systematically tested, revised or replaced. He can never have a growing sense that he's riding the wrong conceptual horse and switch horses. Nor can he test the limits of a given system in any systematic way. Nor is he likely to expand the limits of any system through conceptual analysis or conceptual revision (Harzem & Miles 1978). In short, a theoretically eclectic stance severely limits one's intellectual growth by precluding plumbing the depths of any

conceptual framework. One cannot possibly get to the bottom of anything if one is obligated to continue exploring every direction available.

In summary, theoretical eclecticism may directly harm one's clients because of therapist inconsistency, will surely limit the therapist's intellectual growth and might well suppress his success rate, all other things being equal. Considering the price of theoretical eclecticism, one might wonder why anybody would embrace it.

The theoretical inclinations of practitioners are usually acquired in graduate school. From the standpoint of the graduate student theoretical eclecticism may often appear to be a bargain. A student is rarely hassled for being eclectic since eclecticism is often confused with openmindedness and therefore receives social reinforcement in the form of approval. Perhaps even more important, the student avoids disapproval, and even more powerful aversives such as low grades, lukewarm letters of reference, and loss of opportunity to be part of the "in group" in departments with a large number of theoretically eclectic faculty. In addition, it is difficult to thoroughly understand a coherent theoretical framework whereas it is not too hard to patch together bits and pieces of knowledge. It is also difficult to give up one's unexamined common sense philosophical views, which are familiar and feel right.

All in all, it is simply easier to be eclectic, both in terms of effort expended and aversives avoided. The costs are deferred and often the practitioner never knows the price he has paid, intellectually or professionally.

Advantages of Behavior Analytic Conceptual Viewpoint

The writer is convinced that a thorough understanding of and commitment to a consistent conceptual viewpoint has intellectual and practical benefits. For whatever reasons, people differ in their choices, and as long as a given conceptual framework is viable enough to attract adherents, it will be useful to the intellectual community at large. One would hope that adherents to any conceptual framework could give reasons for their commitment. The clarity and acceptability of those reasons is probably a factor in how many others become capable of adopting one's theoretical framework for as long as it is useful to them. Therefore, this paper concludes with some reasons for adopting the conceptual viewpoint of the author, which may be termed a behavior analytic framework.

First, the same assumptions and principles apply to all people - client and therapist, teacher and student, experimenter and subject, parent and child, economic man and social man, mentally ill and mentally healthy, athlete and scholar, me and thee. Although the specific facts of a child's development may differ from the specifics of economizing behavior, the principles that describe the relations between the behaving persons and their environment are the same. Therefore, an expert on classroom teaching may have a lot to learn about the structure of a labor union, but the same behavioral principles would apply to teachers, students, union leaders, and union members. Thus, a behavior analyst can use the framework she finds useful in practicing therapy to understand the

nature of problems in her own interpersonal relations, the failure of her child in school, and the failure of Americans to conserve energy. The universality of a behavior analytic framework gives coherence to one's intellectual efforts. It also means that what one learns by engaging in the therapeutic process with any given client is theoretically transferrable. It is transferrable in practice to the extent that the practitioner can analyze the process in terms of the framework. And to this extent other practitioners may benefit from the personal experience of one who is able to systematically conceptualize the process.

A second reason for the value of a behavior analytic framework is that it forces the practitioner to examine empirical events and the relations among them. In other words, the theory is tightly related to relations among observable events, making it somewhat difficult for the practitioner to get lost in a maze of speculation. Speculation about hypothetical relations between the client and his environment can be fairly easily tested empirically.

A related value is that the therapist's attention is constantly directed toward the empirical events that constitute the independent variables of which the client's behavior is a function. Alternative viewpoints, including common sense, often focus on higher order concepts without analyzing them to determine the empirical events underlying the concept. The practitioner is left holding the bag, as it were, as she struggles to deal with the client's "self-concept" without understanding the empirical events, and relations among them, that led her to the conclusion that the client has a poor self

concept.

Another heuristic value of a behavior analytic framework is that the therapist is clearly obligated to consider alternative strategies and tactics when therapy fails. She simply cannot blame the client for failing to improve. She doesn't even have to blame herself unless she failed to do or say what she could have reasonably done or said to help the client improve. What she must do is look closely at what she did do or say and try to assess what she might have done differently and why, in terms of the theory, her intervention did not help the client reach his goal. In this way, the therapist is obliged to consider alternative strategies and tactics, since responsibility is clearly on her to arrange things so that the client can learn to resolve his problems.

For the writer, then, a behavior analytic framework is intellectually satisfying and challenging as well as usefully practical and self-correcting. One might wonder why everybody hasn't adopted it. Two reasons appear to leap out. First, because behavior is extremely complex, a great deal of it has not been systematically analyzed within a behavior analytic framework. It is far easier to fall back on well known truisms about behavior than it is to try to understand it systematically. Very few people, even those considering themselves behavior analysts, have followed Skinner's lead (1953, 1957, 1974) in trying to deal with complex events within the framework.

Aside from the difficulty of such an enterprise, graduate students are often actively discouraged from attempting such a feat. They are told a "behavioral approach" is too simple-

minded to deal with the complexities of human behavior; although it is difficult to say how they know this when they're not committed themselves to exploring the possibilities. Behavioral practitioners have, themselves, encouraged the view that a behavioral approach is simple minded. They sometimes have overlooked complex problems because they have not known how to deal with them "behaviorally". They sometimes resort to "explanations" in terms of general labels, just as those of other theoretical persuasions do. The layman's "poor attitude" and the psychoanalyst's "oral fixation" are scarcely worse than the behaviorist's "poor stimulus control" as an explanation of an individual's behavior. At best "poor stimulus control" suggests some classes of variables on which to focus in arriving at a useful explanation.

Summary

A consistent conceptual viewpoint to guide the work of practitioners is both practical and intellectually productive. Although techniques originating from a variety of "schools" may be useful, theoretical eclecticism is more muddle-headed than openminded. Although some practitioners may find other frameworks more satisfying, a behavior analytic framework offers several advantages. It can be used in understanding and dealing with any kind of behavior - adaptive or maladaptive; emotional, intellectual or interpersonal; to name a few. It has good potential for corrective feedback since the behavior analyst must focus on empirical events, which cannot easily be explained away. And it pushes the practitioner toward

developing new techniques by disallowing this cop-out: the client was too messed up to benefit from my wonderful therapy.

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